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ABSTRACT

Plateauing is an individual's conviction that continued progress is impossible. This conviction occurs as a consequence of long periods of occupational stability. When practitioners doubt the probability of promotion or the importance of their work and find their work to be boring and redundant, they are exhibiting symptoms of plateauing rather than those of stress. Structural plateauing occurs when employees cannot obtain promotions. In education, this type of plateauing is due to the dearth of administrative positions available. Content plateauing, by contrast, occurs when employees master their role, believe that little more can be learned about the role, find the work redundant, and become bored. For instance, teaching at the same grade level for 20 or more years is unlikely to provide opportunities for professional growth. The consequences of plateauing may include poor performance, lack of growth, job turnover, excessive absenteeism, decreased productivity, decreased enthusiasm, decreased self-esteem, other morale problems, and a contagious spread of low enthusiasm. Most plateaued employees have been in the same occupational position for over 5 years. Organizations may help to remedy plateauing by developing career transitions, reducing the emphasis on promotion as the symbol of success, and providing supportive supervision. Individuals may accept plateauing and look for satisfaction somewhere else, or they may seek lateral occupational changes or seek a similar position in a different organization. Further research is necessary to more thoroughly examine the phenomena. Thirty-six references are included. (RG)

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PLATEAUING AND ITS CONSEQUENCES FOR EDUCATORS AND EDUCATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

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Paper presented at the
Annual American Educational Research Association Meeting
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PLATEAUING AND ITS CONSEQUENCES FOR EDUCATORS AND EDUCATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

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Bill Waters sat back at his desk, exhausted at the end of his teaching day at East High, where he has taught English for the past eight years. He has been experiencing a feeling of sameness and a vague feeling of despair over the past few years and is beginning to wonder if he is ever going to feel good about his job again....

When Lillian Abernathy became principal at Gold Coast Elementary School she was totally committed to spending her remaining working days in education, but after five years on the job she has started to rethink this commitment. Administration has lost its luster the past few years and she doesn't foresee great opportunities for professional growth in the future....

Peter Harris has a deserved reputation as a highly competent special education diagnostician for the Urbanville School District, However, lately he has begun to notice that his job is no longer satisfying or challenging. He is perplexed because six years ago, when he was a veteran teacher and had eagerly sought the position, he was sure that he would always like being a diagnostician.

If you have been involved in education for any length of time, Bill, Lillian and Peter probably sound like people you know. They are competent professionals, doing at least an adequate job in their different roles. However, all three are feeling an undefined uneasiness about their work situations. Although they have very different roles, they are experiencing a phenomenon that is coming to be referred to as **plateauing.**

The intent of the paper is to promote dialog about this important but little documented phenomenon. Plateauing will be

defined and differentiated from stress because it is important for policy makers to understand and respond to these differences. Causes of plateauing will be delineated, costs will be assessed, and strategies will be offered that can be employed by organizational leaders as well as the individuals affected, to reduce the likelihood of plateauing and moderate negative effects if it has already occurred. Finally, recommendations for research will be developed.

What Is Plateauing

We can all visualize a physical plateau as a flat expanse of land that extends for a long distance. Translated into human terms, plateauing occurs when there is a long period of stability and/or when there is a perception that little progress is likely. **Plateauing can be an important first step towards reassessment and growth, but if forward movement does not occur it can also lead to the perception of being trapped.** Within the context of work individuals who are plateaued will have a sense of intrinsic loss and feel that fulfillment is no longer possible. Under such conditions it is easy to conclude that there is little learning or growth that is or will ever be associated with work responsibilities.

Unless a way out of this situation is perceived, a pervasive feeling that things are not well and that, in all probability, the future will be much the same, is likely to set in; i.e., one will become a plateaued employee. For most plateaued individuals the realization of what has occurred is rather vague. They may sense a general feeling of unease, but they probably will not clearly understand or be able to respond to what they are experiencing because plateauing sets in slowly over time. Nor is there much likelihood of guidance because plateauing has not been widely explored by researchers or explicated and discussed in work settings.

Plateauing and Stress

Individuals who perceive themselves to be highly stressed are exhausted and find it difficultto meet the expectations of their roles. Individuals who perceive themselves to be plateaued, on the other hand, are usually able to perform their tasks competently. Plateauing and stress are both important issues but they must be viewed as distinct if we hope to develop strategies that can respond to them effectively.

In an effort to help policy makers develop ways of enhancing the work environment, researchers have identified and isolated work-related stressors that have debilitating effects on

teachers and administrators. The effectiveness of this effort is questionable because it starts with the assumption that the level of distress felt by educators is significant and that this distress interferes with their abilities to perform organizational tasks. This was a reasonable assumption, given the extensive literature on educator stress that evolved during the 1970s, which seemed to support the conclusion that many educators are highly stressed and, as a result, are unable to fulfill their role responsibilities.

Research we have conducted indicates that educator stress may be overstated as a problem. Our studies show that administrators, as a group, test out below the average of managers over-all on stress tests (Farkas and Milstein, 1986). Teachers report higher levels of stress than administrators. However they do not perceive themselves, as a group, to be more than at the mid-point on stress-intensity scales. (Milstein, et al, 1984).

Closer inspection of the literature on administrator and teacher stress also leaves room for skepticism about the high level of stress among educators (Hiebert and Farber, 1984; Milstein and Farkas, in press). Much of the literature on stress among educators is anecdotal. For example, Hiebert and Farber's review of educational journals found that seventy percent of the articles were anecdotal; i.e., they were subjective and based upon opinion rather than on empirical

evidence. This literature was most often written by teachers and administrators who were disaffected and had a negative perception of the educational enterprise.

The literature which is research-based also has some shortcomings that make findings suspect. These shortcomings include treating a complex phenomenon from a relatively narrow scope of content; reliance on self-reported data with little or no observations of behaviors; lack of physical data to validate self-perception data; and an emphasis on rank-ordered results. By virtue of rank ordering something has to come up as number one, but this does not establish the intensity of the issue. Further, results of research-based studies are far from consistent: "The data are inconclusive. It is most reasonable to conclude that little evidence exists to support the claim that teaching is stressful or teachers unduly stressed" (Hiebert and Farber, 1984, p. 18).

Finally, when viewed against Kahn, et al.'s (1984) "job-related tension index", educators, as an aggregate, clearly approximate a low level stress group. My own research findings indicate that most educators fit the low-stress group typology identified by this research team. That is, they are clear about role expectations; believe they have the authority to perform their responsibilities; think they are able to plan and affect

Characteristics of Low and High Levels of Occupational Stress

Characteristics of Low Level of Occupational Stress	Characteristics of High Level of Occupational Stress
Role Clarity	Role Ambiguity
Authority commensurate with responsibilities	Role responsibility-authority imbalance or conflict
Ability to plan and moderate workload	Extremes of workload
Individuals interact in organization's information-network	Individuals are unable to obtain information necessary to fulfill role responsibilities
Ability to plan career goals with confidence	Job insecurity and lack of ability to predict career future

their work loads; perceive themselves as having ready access to information networks; and seem to be realistic about the probability of achieving their career goals.

This last point--i.e., career planning, leads us away from stress and towards plateauing as the explanatory concept for much of educators' malaise. Many educators have come to the conclusion that there will probably be little or no career advancement. Teachers know that they are in a "front loaded"

occupation (Lortie, 1975); i.e., most of the privileges and work conditions that will be achieved are attained at the outset and it is not likely that these conditions will change significantly. Similarly, administrators know that the organizational pyramid narrows rapidly and that it is unlikely that they will move beyond the level of principal. In fact, many will probably remain at an assistant principal or equivalent level their entire managerial career.

However, it is one thing to realize this fact and quite another to be able to cope with it effectively over a career of three or four decades as a teacher or mid-level educational administrator. Although most continue to perform at least adequately, it is the rare teacher or administrator who is able to stay in one position for more than a few years without a pervasive feeling that it has become rote, routine, and uninteresting. Feeling this way, it is also easy to have growing doubts about the importance the organization places on the activities performed in the role.

Such professionals are not manifesting psychological symptoms of stress so much as they are of plateauing. Unless organizational leaders purposefully intervene, and do so in effective ways, there may be high cost to the organization in the form of poor performance and lower productivity and to the individual in the form of loss of zest, lack of growth and a declining sense of self-worth.

Causes of Plateauing

Most all of us will probably experience symptoms of plateauing at one or more points during our working years. To understand the causes of plateauing and learn how to cope with them effectively we need to be able to identify the source of plateauing we are encountering. Bardwick (1986) categorizes three types of plateauing: **life, structural, and content.** Life plateauing, which can be defined as an over-all sense of routine and sameness about <u>all</u> aspects of one's life, is beyond the scope of this paper, which focuses on structural and content plateauing at work. However, while it will not be treated herein, it is clearly important for organizational policy makers to be sensitive to this phenomenon because it inevitably correlates highly with plateauing problems that individuals encounter at work.

Structural Plateauing

Structural plateauing, which occurs when individuals are unable to obtain promotions, is an inevitable reality, given the traditional pyramidical nature of most complex organizations. By virtue of the fact that there is only room at the top for a

few, many who aspire to climb the promotional ladder will never reach the heights. As Daniel Levinson points out, "for every executive at about 40 who gains the prize and the affirmation he has been seeking, there are perhaps 20 who get little or nothing." (Levinson, 1978). Bardwick (1986), concludes that not more than one in ten who are able and ambitious will even make it to the middle management level and that there is room at the top for only one percent. **This is a reversal of the Peter Principle; i.e., many capable people will not be able to be promoted to higher level positions that they can competently fill.**

Structural plateauing has always been a problem, but it is even more intensified now. Basic demographics draw a picture ofincreasing numbers of aspirants for a decreasing number of upper-level organizational positions. Consider the following:

--**The decade between 1975 and 1985 saw an increase of about 45% in the 30-40 year old group as the baby boom generation came of age** (Bardwick, 1983). Equally important, as a percentage of the over-all population the baby boomers, now moving into the height of their career potential, has increased significantly. In 1970, 25-34 year olds comprised 12 percent of the population in the United States. By 1980 this was 16 percent and it will continue to grow for the next decade. The 35-44 year old group was 11 percent of the population in 1970 and 1980, but will rise to 15 percent in 1990 and about 16 percent in 2000 (Carnevale in Spruell, 1985).

--Fifty-three percent of all women are now in the market place, as compared to 31 percent of all women in 1954 (Bardwick, 1986).

--From 1960-1980 those with high levels of education, which is correlated with upwardly mobile career orientations, has increased. The number of people earning bachelors' degrees has more than doubled. In addition, 23 million Americans are involved in continuing education programs. More than two-thirds of these are job-related courses (Sarnoff, 1984).

--Economic patterns have been reversed from those of the late 1940s through the mid-1970s when expansion was the norm. During that period there was a 56 percent increase in the number of U.S. corporations. (Slocum, et al., 1987). Today weaker organizations are being squeezed out and consolidation of surviving organizations is the predominant trend.

In short, until the past decade there were relatively few aspirants for a growing number of promotional opportunities in an expanding economy. Today there are relatively fewer organizations and more of us are competing for the finite number of upper-level positions available in them.

When organizations mature--i.e, when their rate of expansion slows down, the problem is further exacerbated. The plateauing literature in business differentiates organizations as being either analyzers or defenders in orientation (cf., Slocum, et al. 1987, p. 34). Analyzer firms are growth oriented and seeking new markets and products. Defender firms are mature, have established product lines and little growth potential. Too many educational organizations approximate defender firms;

i.e., many have been in existence for upwards of 100 years, have long since routinized their processing and product-related behaviors, and have experienced not only reduced growth but actual decline in the number of clients they serve. In such organizations it is difficult enough to remain employed, let alone expect continuing upward career mobility.

In education there are other unique factors that lead to structural plateauing. The baby boom generation is producing fewer babies of its own. Schools, in short, have experienced a shrinking market for their services. This trend is beginning to be reversed, but at a much slower rate than the rate at which those from the baby boom generation who have chosen education as a career are pressing for promotion opportunities.

Equally important, for most teachers, "promotion" means obtaining an administrative position. The dilemmma is that moving into administration is not really a promotion because it does not enhance a teacher's ability to directly practice the act of teaching. Many good teachers withdraw from the classroom because of lack of opportunity for career advancement <u>as teachers</u>. Administrators' abilities to affect classroom outcomes, even at an indirect level (i.e., facilitating and supporting exemplary teaching) is limited. The recent educational reform movement argues that administrators should be

heavily involved with the teaching that goes on in their schools. However, it is questionable that this will be the reality in most situations given th overwhelming number of routine management tasks that administrators must attend to and the open-ended, crisis-oriented nature of their daily activities.

Even this traditional route to what can questionably be called a promotion is not readily available nor easily climbed. Though educational organizations may be large in size, there are relatively few supervisory positions available to aspirants. Given the professional nature of the field, these organizations are "flat" hierarchies with attendant high subordinate to supervisor ratios. Compared to business organizations, the hierarchical pyramid in educational organizations has relatively few levels and relatively few positions at each of these levels.

To get a position on the first rung of a flat hierarchy is difficult because there are so few of them. Equally important, there is not much likelihood that those who do make it to the first rung of the ladder will ever reach upper level management positions which

> offer greater motivating potential in terms of autonomy, variety, opportunity to make decisions and so on. Given that plateaued managers often occupy middle-level jobs and that they may hold those jobs for a number of years, thus receiving less autonomy, variety, etc, than they might have earlier, it seems likely that the job situations of

> plateaued managers would provide less stimulation than other jobs. In this case, reduced satisfaction and performance may reflect the nature of the job, as much as the fact of the career plateau (Near, 1984, p. 178).

Most teachers who make it to the first rung of management become assistant principals. Many of those who have the qualities required to move up the hierarchy may find themselves stuck at this level for many years and possibly for the remainder of their careers because of lack of promotion opportunities.

School districts increase the likelihood of plateauing occurring when they encourage teachers and lower-level administrators to work hard and strive for achievement and then are unable to reward them with recognition in the form of career advancement and promotion. "Increased responsibilities, status symbols, and other material rewards that go hand in hand with promotions carry the message, 'I am a winner.' When promotions stop, many...feel like failures." (Slocum, et al., 1987, p. 31).

Content Plateauing

As long as we continue to think narrowly of career growth as limitless opportunities for promotion, most all of us will feel plateaued. However, there is another kind of plateauing issue that is not seriously or frequently addressed and for which there is greater possibility to develop effective responses.

While structural, or promotional, plateauing is probably inevitable for most of us, content plateauing does not have to occur: "No one ever knows everything; no one has ever done everything. There are no limits to change and challenge except those created by personal fear or organizational laziness." (Bardwick, 1986, p. 67).

Content plateauing occurs when one becomes an expert in a role, concludes that there is little new to be learned about it,finds the work to be routine and begins to feel bored. As Bardwick notes,

> the information we have says that it is difficult to have a sense of learning if your work remains essentially the same for more than three years. Most complex jobs are mastered in that time. If we expand the number of years from three to five in order to account for the different time clocks in people's heads, then that tells us how long it usually takes for the sense of mastery to be replaced by the feeling of boredom if work is static. (Bardwick, 1986, p. 74).

Most teachers have been in the classroom for much more than three to five years. Equally relevant, this has been a rapidly developing situation (Milstein, 1987). In the early 1960s only 35 percent of the teachers Charters (1970) surveyed were still in the classroom after 4 years. By 1972, Mark and Anderson (1978) found that 59 percent of teachers surveyed in their study were still teaching after 4 years. By 1984 the median classroom experience of American teachers was 14.7 years (Harris, 1984). These data indicate a clear trend towards more seasoned veterans in the classroom.

Most educators are motivated, at least in part, by security needs satisfaction. Their willingness to sacrifice monetary returns, by chosing education as a career, can be viewed as a trade-off for the avoidance of unnecessary risks. However, security, once attained, can also diminish the likelihood of growth possibilities. Teaching at one grade level for two or more decades may or may not be satisfying, but it is hardly likely to lead to many opportunities to learn, try out new skills and, in other ways, to grow professionally, at least not without purposeful intervention to facilitate such growth.

Further, the bureaucratic nature of many educational organizations often leaves teachers feeling frustrated in their work situations. As one recent study concludes, teachers "expect to be recognized as possessing a degree of expertise which gives them the right to a high level of work autonomy, the ability to serve as their own judges, and to be highly involved in decision making." (Conley, 1987, pp. 4-5). However, more often than not, the reality of the work situation falls far short of this expectation:

> In elementary and secondary schools, teachers have characteristically worked alone, and have enjoyed little time and space for interacting with other adults they have come to like. Supervision has been occasional and remote. Teachers have had little to do with making important decisions. As a consequence, the ego of many a competent teacher who has felt confined and powerless within a lonely environment has been damaged. (Doll, 1983, p. 255)

Stars, Solid Citizens, Deadwood and Plateauing

As Doll notes, there is little probability that teachers will receive continuous, meaningful supervisory feedback. Neither will most teachers find opportunities for promotion. Given these realities, it is also not likely that most teachers will continue, over time, to feel a sense of growth and accomplishment or that they will ever become stars, at least not if we narrowly define stars as those who move into management positions. A few may just give up, mark time and otherwise become the deadwood that all organizations must tolerate. However, most will likely remain as solid citizens who accommodate to their work realities and do the best job they can under the circumstances. Under present conditions this group will receive little attention by organizational leaders who are preoccupied with moving the stars up the hierarchy and trying to contain the negative impact that the deadwood can potentially causee for everyone involved.

The point is that the organization's preoccupation with stars and deadwood compounds the plateauing problem for solid citizens. It is the solid citizen group that tends to most of the organization's work, but unless we can identify ways of addressing this group's need for recognition, reward, growth,

stimulation and motivation, the organization's ability to achieve its purposes and the individual's sense of well being will be jeopardized.

Costs and Characteristics of Plateauing

Research about the phenomena of plateauing in industrial firms (cf. Carnazza, 1981; Evans and Gilbrey, 1984; Hartman and Baron, 1984; Jacobs, 1982; Near, 1984, 1985; Orpen, 1983; Slocum, et al., 1985 and 1987; and Veiga, 1981) is less than a decade old and is limited in depth, scope and extent. Given this and the fact that there have been no comparable research efforts in education to date, caution is required in making statements about the costs of plateauing or the characteristics plateaued teachers and administrators manifest.

Given this caution, the research base does indicate that there can be extensive costs to both the organizations and the individuals involved. These costs can occur in such forms as lower productivity, morale problems, job turnover, and excessive absenteeism. Those who perceive themselves to be plateaued view the likelihood of promotion or job change as remote, whether due to personal inabilities or organizational resistance. In addition, there is some evidence that these individuals:

--**are less satisfied than their colleagues who do not perceive themselves to be plateaued** (cf., Near, 1984; Orpen, 1983);

--**view their supervisors less favorably than those who do not perceive themselves to be plateaued**; e.g., Near (1984) found only 43 percent of plateaued managers favorably disposed towards their supervisors as compared to 73 percent of those who did not perceive themselves to be plateaued;

--**view themselves as less important to their jobs and organizations, work fewer hours, are absent more frequently, and judge themselves to be in poorer health** (Near, 1984); and

--**think more about leaving their places of employment but have less confidence in being able to successfully find a satisfactory position, then their non-plateaued counterparts** (Orpen, 1983, Veiga, 1981).

Research findings indicate that plateaued individuals are most likely to be found among:

--**those who remain in well-defined positions for more than five years** (Bardwick, 1987);

--**older workers.** In a study of plateaued and non-plateaued managers, Near (1984) found that 65 percent of those over age 40 characterized themselves as plateaued;

--**those who have not attended college.** Only 47 percent of the plateaued managers in Near's study (1984) went to college, while 64 percent of the non-plateaued managers did so;

--**those who change positions frequently and move across organizations in the earlier stages of their careers, and then change positions less frequently later in their careers.** It appears that these individuals may be moving randomly earlier and then, either due to lack of a well-developed foundation or personal inability, get stuck in a position (Orpen, 1983, Veiga, 1981); and

--**those who work in mature, low-growth organizations** as opposed to organizations that are growing, adding new products and seeking larger market shares. (Slocum, et al., 1985).

The costs to the organization as well as to the individual can be even greater than the literature indicates because plateauing can be contagious. Plateaued employees are likely to perform their role activities with reduced enthusiasm and energy. If this happens they will be poor role models for their younger colleagues. In education younger teachers form their own professional personas, at least in part, based upon how their more experienced colleagues and supervisors conduct themselves. Given our highly senior work force and the relatively few new professionals who have been able to find positions in education in recent years, this can be a major problem. With fewer contemporaries to compare onesself to, newer teachers must rely heavily on the modeling behavior of their more experienced collegues.

Most important, there will probably be a negative impact on students if plateaued teachers and administrators are less satisfied and respond to their situations by being absent frequently, working fewer hours when they are on the job, being at odds with their supervisors, and, perhaps, wishing they could

leave the profession. Such teachers and administrators may have mastered the content of their roles, but it they do not have much enthusiasm for their jobs, it is doubtful that they will be able to imbue their students with enthusiasm for learning.

Responding to Plateauing: What Organizations Can Do

Organizations have not confronted the issue of plateauing very effectively. In most cases plateauing has not even been clearly defined or recognized as a legitimate concern. In many organizations when the issue does arise, it is deemed inappropriate to talk about because it may trigger reduced motivation and productivity (Kelly, 1985). Where this attitude prevails, a self-fulfilling reality of wide-spread employee plateauing is likely to occur.

Organizational leaders may be slow to respond to the needs of plateaued employees if they are preoccupied with output concerns. For example, Slocum, et al., (1985) found that senior managers ranked "improving the quality of work life tenth out of ten goals...to the success of the firm. For them, the most important function was production, followed by finance and quality control" (p. 143). In short the focus of such managers is on productivity, not maintenance or growth of their work

force. This is an approach that can lead to major problems: "an organization may not need the total potential of its plateaued employees, but it cannot afford to alienate them." (Bardwick, 1986 pp. 65-66).

When organizations do deal with plateauing, the emphasis is most often on such negative sanctions as raising performance expectations, pressures to take early retirement, and threats of firing, demoting, or removing such employees from the action by kicking them "upstairs." (Bardwick, 1983). When organizations use such negative sanctions, it is hardly likely that the needs of plateaued employees or, consequently, the organization will be met.

More effective strategies are available and should be considered. Included among those most prominently identified in the literature are the following which I have clustered into seven categories.

A. **Recognition of the phenomenon.** Plateauing is highly probable, whether we are talking about those who seek ever-more illusive promotions or those who hold positions that appear after three to five years to have little variability. Organizations should be honest with employees about the limits to promotion opportunities as well as job growth possibilities and help them to recognize plateauing as a normal situation. Honest feedback can help to demystify the problem while sending clear signals that the organization cares about its employees' welfare.

B. **Reduced focus on promotion as the major indicator of "success."** Since most organizations cannot promote all

who are able and interested, they should emphasize that there are alternative ways to succeed, including self-satisfaction, organizational rewards (intrinsic and extrinsic) for doing a good job in one's present position, and establishing a healthier balance between work and other aspects of life.

C. **Development of career transitions**. Organizationally-designed career transitions can be developed around:

-- **hiring**: Knowing that relatively few newly-hired individuals will have opportunities to be promoted, organizations can select fewer stars and more solid citizens. This does not mean selecting mediocre candidates. Rather, it means less emphasis on promotion potential and more emphasis on entry-level position abilities and interests;

-- **career planning**: Help employees develop a realistic understanding about the potential for promotion, the alternatives available to them in the organization and elsewhere, and the efforts required to qualify for career changes;

-- **equitable promotions**: Develop a set of policies that supports promotions based upon merit. Be sure that these policies are widely understood throughout the organization and that they are enforced uniformally. Often distress associated with promotion has to do with employees' perceptions, rightly or wrongly, that they are made on the basis of personal relations ("the old boy network") rather than on the basis of abilities and qualifications;

-- **Transitions into retirement**: Very often employees who are near the end of their working days and in positions that they have held for many years, may find themselves counting the days until retirement. Organizations can ease this problem and probably create renewed enthusiasm if they provide opportunities for phased transitionsinto retirement. For example, organizations can allow employees to gradually reduce their work time from 100 percent to 75 percent, and 50 percent or less over the last years of their careers.

D. **Increase role efficacy to help solid citizens combat plateauing while remaining in their present positions.** Role efficacy, which is achieved when we feel effective and satisfied in our work, is based on a sense that our jobs are centrally important to the organization, offer us sufficient opportunities to be creative, proactive, and interrelate with other role players, and provide opportunities to offer and receive help, serve larger causes, and grow personally and professionally (Pareek, 1980). There are multiple ways that an organization can promote role efficacy, including:

-- **Job enrichment opportunities:** Lateral transfers that capitalize on proven skills but provide alternative settings in which to practice them; opportunities to work in teams for those who so desire; job redesign efforts; opportunities for senior employees to mentor junior employees; updating and advanced training and development to keep up with relevant changes that relate to roles; and challenges, with attendant rewards, to grow, try new methods and alternative approaches. The message to the employee that the organization believes he can grow and do things differently is as important as the actual opportunities that are provided.

-- **Honest evaluative feedback.** Too often organizations do not give honest, behaviorally-anchored feedback, positive or negative, to solid citizens who have been in their positions for extended periods of time. The implicit message to such employees is that what they do is not of central importance to the organization. To be motivated, to perform and grow in our work, we need to receive the message that our activities matter, our work effectiveness is of concern and our supervisors, believe we want to do our best and be challenged to grow in our positions.

-- **Meaningful rewards for effective performance.** When reward is narrowly limited to promotions which are not probable, or tied to time-in-place and credentials, as it is in education, there is little motivation to perform effectively. Career ladders and merit pay are some of the elements that could be built into a meaningful reward system that de-emphasizes promotion and time-in-place. Enhancement of status, organizational messages of recognition, and supplemental support in the form of materials and supplies, are other strategies that can be effectively employed.

E. **Promotion of the health needs of employees.** Organizations can do much to help employees overcome health problems that are related to plateauing. Strategies that have been developed to combat the negative manifestations of stress cad also help plateaued employees cope. These strategies include relaxation exercises, diet control, physical exercise and counseling. In addition to having the potential of improving health status and reducing absenteeism, such responses send the important message that all employees are important to the organization.

F. **Supportive supervision.** Plateaued employees tend to view supervisors less positively than do their non-plateaued counterparts. The combined effects of perceiving themselves to be experts in their jobs and being less motivated about them than formerly will probably cause them to be less responsive to supervisors who they perceive to be status-conscious or to have little to offer. Supervisors can do much to change this perception by giving honest appraisals; maintaining high profiles by being present on a regular basis throughout their supervisory areas, rather than just when formal evaluations are required or when there are problems; and sending signals that they value the ideas of these expert employees.

-- **Involvement in the life of the larger organization.** Plateaued employees are often isolated from wider organizational dynamics. This isolation can compound the sense of anomie they have about their roles in the organization. Top management can do much to mitigate this problem, by encouraging employees to become involved in organizational goal setting, decision making and problem solving. Such involvement, to be effective, must be based upon training in skill areas such as problem solving, communications and team management. Also, the issues employees are invited to explore should be ones that they believe are relevant both to their roles and to the organization over-all. The pay-offs in the form of motivation gained from a better sense of over-all organizational purposes, a good sense of how particular roles serve these purposes, and a belief that the organization values its employees' inputs, can be substantial.

Responding to Plateauing: What the Individual Can Do

Individuals who are experiencing plateuaing can do much to help themselves, assuming that they can recognize and accept the reality of the situation. Unfortunately most do not recognize the problem, while others simply deny, consciously or unconsciously, that they are in a career plateauing situation. For those who are more aware and do make decisions to deal with it, responses traditionally fall in one or more of the following categories:

--**The placid approach.** The individual accepts the situation as it is, does what has to be done in the job, and looks for satisfaction elsewhere;

The hopscotch approach. The individual stays in the same organization but seeks lateral moves.

--**Change of uniform approach.** The individual seeks a similar position in another organization in hopes that the situation will be more positive.

-- **Entrepreneur approach.** The individual leaves the organization, identifies a market for services or goods and starts a consulting firm or a business. (Rantze and Feller, 1985, p. 25).

Some may succeed in getting off their plateaues using one or more of these approaches. However, for many others the results are not so positive. There are alternative strategies available to those who are aware of being plateaued and intent on overcoming it. These alternatives include:

A. **Establishing a realistic picture of the situation.** "Until plateaued people face their issues squarely, they exist in anxiety. Anxiety is like a fog--formless and hard to sweep away. Most people do much better when a vague issue is transformed into a specific problem because they can begin to do something about it." (Bardwick, 1986, p. 98). Individuals need to recognize that plateauing is a normal situation, that there is a growing literature on it, and that there are qualified career counselors from whom they can get clarifying information and advice.

B. **Seeking ways to grow in a career while staying in the same position.** Feldman (1987) identifies four career stages, each of which emphasizes different relationships. These relationships move along a continuum from apprentice, to colleague, to mentor, and finally to sponsor. One way to get off a plateau is to recognize that each of us has the capacity to move beyond a focus on our own learning and development--i.e., the apprenticeship and colleague stages, and on to fostering the career growth of younger organizational members, by exploring our potential for mentoring and sponsoring. Once we are expert at what we do, we need not merely routinize our performance. Instead, we can share with others the skills, knowledge and insights we have mastered. It can be a very liberating experience to focus on giving and re-experiencing our earlier work days through the eyes of our younger colleagues.

C. **Being Intrapreneurial.** Whereas entrepreneurs try to overcome the possibility of plateauing by leaving their organizatiions, entrapreneurs remain and find opportunities for growth, challenge, and learning by

actively working to improve them. Rantze and Feller (1985) refer to these individuals as "internal venturists," who seek to identify new products, better practices, and to transfer ideas from one setting to another, within the organization. This active coping strategy requires a willingness to take risks and a desire to grow.

D. **Putting work in perspective by seeking a better balance with other life activities.** Having become experts in our jobs, we no longer have to prove that we are capable. This can be a freeing sensation if we recognize that it can allow us to experience our total lives more fully. We are all susceptible to compulsive work behavior, even in unsatisfactory work situations, but this does not have to be an inevitability. It is within our power to seek a healthier balance for ourselves, as well as for others we relate to both inside and outside our organizations.

When individual strategies such as those noted above are combined with effective organizational strategies, the likelihood of successful coping can be greatly enhanced.

Recommendations for Research

Research regarding plateauing is still in an early stage. Given the short time that plateauing has been studied, it is not surprising that the methods employed have been far from consistent, and the results obtained have not been uniform or conclusive. Equally important, most of the research has been limited to business and industrial firms and there has been an absence of studies examining plateauing among educators. Given these limitations, five avenues for useful additional research come to mind:

A. **Research findings regarding the relationship of satisfaction and plateauing are inconclusive.** Evans and Gilbrey (1984) and Slocum, et al., (1985) have concluded that there is no evidence that satisfaction is related to plateauing. Carnazza (1981) and Conley (1987) conclude that satisfaction is dependent upon such factors as the nature of the job, the role clarity associated with it, and the extent to which it is routinized. Hartman (1984), Near (1984), Orpen (1981), and Veiga (1981), indicate that there is an inverse relationship between the level of satisfaction and the degree of plateauing an individual experiences. Because satisfaction is an important factor and the findings are so inconclusive, this is an avenue of research that should be pursued further.

B. **Most researchers have chosen to define plateauing narrowly.** Specifically, plateauing has been defined as lack of perception of opportunities for vertical or structural promotions. Hartman (1984), for example, identified plateaued respondents on the basis of a single question: "There are many promotional opportunities for individuals in this organization" (p. 4). Others who have taken the same approach include Carnazza (1981), Evans and Gilbrey (1984), Near (1984), Orpen (1981), Slocum, et al. (1987) and Veiga (1981). Bardwick (1986), an exception to this rule, emphasizes the importance of plateauing within a given position (content plateauing) as well as due to lack of promotions. Research is required that considers broader aspects of plateauing.

C. **Even within the narrow focus on promotion, there has not been general agreement on the criteria to be used to indicate when plateauing occurs.** For example, Hartman (1984) and Near (1984) used respondents' self perceptions as the sole criteria while Evans and Gilbrey (1984), Orpen (1981), Jacobs (1982), and Veiga (1981) used age (over 45, 39-45, mid-30s, and 40+ respectively) as the initial sorting criteria for identifying plateaued employees. It would be helpful if studies began from the same, or at least similar, sets of criteria.

D. **The research thus far has focused mainly on salespersons** (Slocum et al., 1985) **and managers** (Carnazza, 1981; Evans and Gilbrey, 1984; Hartman, 1984; Jacobs, 1982; Near, 1984; Orpen, 1983; and Veiga, 1981). It is questionable whether these findings can be readily translated to professional groups such as doctors, lawyers, administrators and teachers, or to other classes of workers, such as line workers in primary industry.

E. **The lack of knowledge about plateauing in education calls for a variety of research efforts.** Questions to be addressed include:

--What is the extent of plateauing among teachers and administrators?

--Does educator plateauing have a noticeable negative effect on the education received by students?

--Are there any noticeable difference in the extent of or form that plateauing takes between elementary and secondary-level educators or between school-based and central office educators?

--Does the time educators are in a given role affect the extent to which they perceive themselves to be plateaued?

--Do teachers and administrators differ in the extent to which they perceive themselves to be plateaued and in the ways that they manifest it when it does occur?

--Do educational organizations and plateaued individuals implement strategies in response to this phenomenon?

--If such strategies are being employed, are they having a positive impact on the plateauing issue?

In Closing

The intent of this exploratory paper is to stimulate dialog about the potential problems that plateauing holds for educational organizations, and the individuals who work in them. It is an important phenomenon and one which we have not yet focused upon sufficiently. Our tendency to look at stress as the operative concept to explain the malaise that seems to be affecting many educators may be restraining us from viewing

plateauing for what it is. The lack of analysis concerning plateauing and the potential impact it may be having upon teachers' and administrators' abilities to function effectively are sufficient reasons for researchers, policy makers and educational leaders to examine it seriously.

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